Title

Understanding inclusion in Cyprus

Journal

European Journal of Special Needs Education, 28(4)

ISSN

0885-6257

Author

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Publication Date

2013-11-01

DOI

10.1080/08856257.2013.820461

Peer reviewed

European Journal of Special Needs Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rejs20

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Published online: 22 Jul 2013.

To cite this article: European Journal of Special Needs Education (2013): Understanding inclusion in Cyprus, European Journal of Special Needs Education, DOI: 10.1080/08856257.2013.820461

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2013.820461

European Journal of Special Needs Education, 2013
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2013.820461

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Understanding inclusion in Cyprus

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(*Received 28 February 2013; final version received 20 June 2013*)

This paper provides a framework for understanding inclusion in Cyprus. The evidence base is the result of a six-month qualitative research study in five Cypriot mainstream primary schools. Despite the rhetoric in favour of inclusion, it seems that the Cypriot educational system is still highly segregating in its philosophy and does not fully support the active inclusion and participation of all children in the school life. Overall, the framework is grounded on three key themes emerging from the research: inclusion is concerned only with the education of specific groups of children; the medical model is still prevalent within inclusion discourse; and inclusion is understood as consisting of different levels. As a result, a restructuring and transformation of inclusive education are necessary so as to reduce marginalisation and exclusion of many children and in particular those who have been identified as having special educational needs.

Keywords: inclusion; Cyprus; special educational needs; exclusion

Introduction

In Cyprus, as in other parts of the world, a move towards more inclusive educational policies and practices has gained momentum. In the light of recent social unrest in various countries and continuous financial instability, educational systems try to restructure themselves so to be more supportive to the community and ultimately more inclusive. For example, the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994) laid out the vision for more inclusive education and the relatively recent international 'Education For All' programme have generated opportunities for delivering quality education for all (Miles and Singal 2010). This primarily theoretical trend of moving towards more inclusive ends in education involves stakeholders, practitioners, children, and parents facing new challenges in engaging with new roles and responsibilities. A similar trend is being recorded in Cyprus on paper in any case. The recent and long-awaited educational reform that started taking place in the current school year has called for more dynamic approaches in teaching and learning, introduced new curricula and invested millions in training teachers to embrace the proposed changes.

This paper draws on a research conducted in five mainstream primary schools. The primary focus of it was to gain insights with regards to inclusion rhetoric and practice. Data analysis revealed three key themes that best describe inclusion in

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Cyprus. In doing so, these key themes provide the basis for a theoretical framework to understand inclusion. The themes are as follows:

(1) Inclusion is concerned only with the education of specific groups of children, primarily of those identified as having special educational needs.
(2) The medical, deficit and/or charitable model reflects the behaviours and views of teachers, pupils and parents.
(3) Inclusion is understood as consisting of different, separate and distinguishable levels, namely locational, social, and academic inclusion. Primarily, but not exclusively, inclusion is implemented on a solely locational level.

These key themes have a significant overlap with each other. All themes are closely connected to each other and all of them together provide a theoretical framework for understanding inclusion. Arguably, examining each theme separately is not straightforward. What is important to clarify is that there is no hierarchy among the themes but instead there is a constant interaction and a close relationship between all of them. The main part of this paper is structured under three main sections, each one corresponding to a key theme.

Cyprus context

There have been major changes in the way children identified as having special educational needs receive their education in Cyprus within the past two decades. In 1999, the Cypriot House of Parliament passed the Education Act for Children with Special Needs (MEC 1999), which was followed by the publication of the regulations that governed its implementation (MEC 2001). According to this law, all children have the right to be educated in their neighbouring regular school alongside their age-mates. One component of vital importance of this law is that it has introduced officially, for the first time, integration and/or inclusion into primary education. As a result, there is a trend of moving towards inclusive education.

According to the latest annual reports of the Ministry of Education and Culture, around 5% of the primary education student population is officially identified as having special educational needs. About 0.5% are students who attend the nine special schools across Cyprus and the remaining are educated in mainstream settings, either in the so-called special units or receive individualised teaching from a special support teacher in a special resource classroom. The latter two groups of children spend considerable time in their mainstream classroom and are withdrawn to the special unit or classroom according to their individual assessment report. This practice reflects the dual model of special education and inclusion in Cyprus which implies that students with special educational needs receive their education in both special and mainstream schools.

Methodology

Data were collected from five primary schools in the course of a six-month period. Qualitative data techniques were employed, namely observation, semi-structured interviews with children and teachers, and a research diary was kept during data collection. In total, 146 children participated across eight classrooms within the five schools, 10 classroom and four special support teachers. Six weeks of observation

were devoted in each school, all 14 teachers and 40 children took part in interviews. Therefore, data were generated from the many hours of observation in the schools, the interviews from teaching staff and children as well as from the informal conversations with parents, teachers, and students. Anonymity of all participants was assured and informed consent from parents and children was sought. Ethical guidelines provided by the British Educational Research Association (BERA 2011) and the Cyprus Ministry of Education were fully taken into consideration when conducting the research.

In terms of data analysis and presentation, a 'portrait of each school has been drawn'. Portraiture as a form of inquiry was first proposed and further developed by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (Lawrence-Lightfoot 2005; Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997). Portraits in this study are not drawn in the traditional sense but are written. They do not present images of a posed person, but descriptions of the processes of the five primary schools and respective classrooms, as well as individual pupils' and teachers' behaviours and practices respectively. My purpose was to enter into relationships with participants that had the 'qualities of empathetic regard, full and critical attention, and a discerning gaze' (Lawrence-Lightfoot 1983, 6). Portraits with their vivid descriptions provide material to 'work with', 'in ways that distantiating policy and scholarly abstractions often do not' (Hall, Thomson, and Jones 2008, 3). The systematic, detailed observational data as well as data from the semi-structured in-depth interviews with pupils and teachers provided in the portraits were so important to tell the story of each school. As a result, my portraits also offer an opportunity for readers to extract their own meanings, interpretations and reading of the data.

In order to achieve this richness and immediacy of data, vignettes were employed as assistive tools to 'drawing' the schools' portraits. According to Miles and Huberman (1994, 81), a vignette 'has a narrative, story-like structure that preserves chronological flow and that normally is limited to a brief time span, to one or a few key actors, to a bounded space, or to all three'.

As Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983, 7) has argued, 'I tell the stories, paint the portrait – from the inside out'. Similarly to Lawrence-Lightfoot who used the metaphor of the 'group portrait', I have used the metaphor of a 'mosaic', as it encompasses the idea of bringing smaller pieces/portraits (individual schools, classes, individual views and behaviours) together in order to create a unified whole/mosaic (theoretical framework for understanding inclusion). These individual pieces/tiles have been placed together and, in doing so, a theorisation of inclusion has been crafted. This mosaic construction is, inevitably, the result of the craftsman's skills, quality of materials, time availability, workshop's facilities, conditions, and other. Therefore, in a metaphorical manner, the understanding of inclusion in Cyprus has been the result of all these interrelated skills and conditions needed by the researcher, such as researcher's skills, philosophy and approaches, quality of data collected, availability of time, resources, support and so forth.

The primary purpose was to craft a mosaic of, or in other words, develop a theoretical framework for understanding inclusion across the five schools. A reflection on the everyday teaching and learning practices across the schools, and on the views and behaviours of pupils and teachers has provided insights as to the way inclusion was being implemented. Many barriers to inclusion have been identified and highlighted. My intention was not to compare the schools in any hierarchical sense. Rather, it has to be acknowledged that each school was unique in deploying

its inclusion strategies in response to its own particular needs and complexities. Inevitably, whilst all five schools shared certain common characteristics and concerns they were each distinct from one other. Stake (2006) argues that in order to understand complex educational programmes or phenomena, such as inclusion, it is often useful to look carefully at persons and operations in several locations. Within the five schools, inclusion operated in different conditions while each school had its own characteristics and problems.

The life of each individual school was interesting for what it could reveal about the whole educational system in Cyprus, as far as inclusive education was concerned. My intention was not to make any generalisations across the schools but rather to enhance an in-depth understanding and gain a clearer picture of the whole by considering both commonalities between and variations amongst them.

Findings – discussion

Inclusion is primarily concerned with special educational needs

There has been a common assumption among the great majority of the participants in the research that inclusion is exclusively about educating children identified as having special educational needs. The terms of special education and inclusion were used as synonyms by most of the teachers across the five schools. When asked to define inclusion, one teacher said:

> … inclusion is about providing special education to children with special needs. It is really a sensitive issue but special teachers cope very well with these children and help them as much as they can.

Another teacher argued that:

> … inclusion means to have all the right mechanisms in place to support and educate all children with special educational needs.

This is also partly reflected in several government documents. Indeed, the *1999 Education Act* is actually subtitled *for Children with Special needs*, even though this is the policy document that officially introduced the notion of 'inclusive education' within Cypriot mainstream primary education. This contradiction, within the legislation itself, actually reinforces labelling and categorisation, and generates as well as perpetuates the marginalisation of most of the pupils identified as having special educational needs. This piece of legislation is outdated and cannot respond to the idea of inclusion in Cyprus. Therefore, it is necessary to be revised or replaced.

Angelides, Charalambous, and Vrasidas (2004) and Mamas (2012) have concluded that the way inclusive education operates in Cyprus is contradictory and ultimately not inclusive. While the law (1999 Education Act) refers to inclusion, the practice of special teachers, as defined by the Ministry of Education (MEC 1999), is to withdraw children from their classes and to teach them in a separate classroom, so reinforcing their marginalisation. Hall (1997) has acknowledged the puzzling language of integration vs. segregation. He has explained that we are relatively content to engage in practices that are segregative but shrink from talking about them as such. This seems to be the situation in Cyprus.

When teachers asked in the interviews whether there was any difference between the meaning of inclusion in mainstream classrooms and educational provision in separate classrooms, such as the special support class, where children are withdrawn for a specific period of time to receive individualised teaching, one of them pointed out:

> … I'm not sure if there is any difference between these two. I think supporting children who need help in a separate classroom is what inclusion is about. These children [identified as having special educational needs] receive better quality teaching when they are taught in the special class with the special education teacher.

A special support class setting in a mainstream school is barely described as a segregated placement. In contrast, this practice is described by teachers as inclusive. It seems that the current legislation reinforces another form of segregation, rather than inclusion.

Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson (2006, 16) question such an approach to inclusion that, in attempting to increase the participation of pupils, focuses on 'special needs' and ignores all the other ways in which participation for all pupils may be impeded, such as the significant negative effects of categorisation and ability labelling. They argue that categorisation processes, and the practices and language associated with them, act as barriers to the development of a broader view of inclusion. This is particularly true within the Cypriot context. In this study, it has been clear from most teachers' interviews that they believed pupils, identified as having special educational needs, cannot really participate in learning. This often results in low-learning expectations for these pupils. The attachment of the label 'special educational needs' to a child, makes teachers think and act in different ways, and this inevitably impedes the learning and participation of such pupils (Mamas 2012).

The multiple effects of ability labelling and categorisation on pupils' learning and participation and teachers' thinking and practice are increasingly being highlighted (Hart 2000; Hart et al. 2004). Long back, Hargreaves (1982, 62) concluded that ability labelling leads to a 'destruction of dignity so massive and pervasive that few subsequently recover from it'. Loss of dignity, however, combined with an internalised sense of inadequacy that derives from the view of children identified as having special educational needs as defect, creates psychological conditions that impair their capacity to learn (Hart et al. 2004). It is worth recalling here the words of a teacher in the research. He said he had to 'force them' to contribute in the lesson and that 'they (children with special educational needs) try to remain silent and unnoticed in the classroom'. It is apparent that the learning capacity of these pupils has been impaired and schooling is by no means a positive experience for them. This, in turn, has had a detrimental effect on their development of social interactions and contacts with peers, which again has impeded their learning capacity. This circular process has emerged from the findings of the study.

Hart et al. (2004) argue that there is a hidden curriculum of schooling, which operates independently of teachers' intentions. Its impact on pupils' attitudes, motivation and attainment can undermine everything that teachers are consciously trying to achieve through their teaching. According to them, ability labelling or categorisation by ability affects pupils in the following ways (Hart et al. 2004, 28–36):

- It creates a disposition to accept as normal and inevitable, the limited achievement of a significant proportion of the school population, namely pupils categorised as having special educational needs.
- It reifies differences and hardens hierarchies, so that we start to think of those in different categories as different kinds of learners, with different kinds of minds, different characteristics and very different needs.
- It inclines teachers to believe that they cannot effectively teach pupils of different abilities together which results in discrimination against particular groups of children.

The special educational needs view of inclusion is deeply entrenched within Cypriot national educational policies and practices in schools. It seems that this approach deflects difficulties that arise in education towards the model of individual defect or deficit, which is further discussed below. Consequently, this view of inclusion narrows down the real issues of and shadows the challenge of developing responsive schools for all learners. Furthermore, legislation itself promotes this kind of thinking. It is generally known that classes within Cypriot mainstream schools are formed on a mixed-ability basis. Pupils identified as having special educational needs are placed at the very bottom end of this constructed ability continuum. The findings of this study demonstrate how learning can be impeded by this kind of mind-set that is dominant within the Cypriot context. This theme shows that by focusing on differences, and what appears to account for differences, it diverts attention from the effects of classroom processes that may be limiting learning and participation for everyone.

The medical, deficit and charitable model

The second key theme emerging from this study is that the medical, deficit and/or charitable model of disability is still prevalent as far as the views and behaviours of teachers, pupils, and parents are concerned. Each one of these three groups is examined separately in the following subsections.

Teachers' perspectives

The medical/individual model can help explaining or understand teachers' perspectives, related to inclusive education and, in particular, to the education of pupils identified as having special educational needs. This model is predominantly reflected on their everyday teaching strategies and, at the same time, provides for them a framework of 'defence' and 'excuse' to support their 'perceived inability' or 'non-responsibility' to educate these children. Antonia (a classroom teacher) when interviewed said:

> … Despite the fact I'm very willing to help the children with special needs, I can't. It is beyond my professional expertise. Moreover, I don't have the time needed to support them individually.

In most cases, teachers considered a pupil's identified special educational need as a fixed problem within that child, which can only be dealt with by staff with particular expertise, such as special support teachers, speech therapists,

psychologists and so forth. As a result, they considered themselves as 'incapable' and 'unqualified' to teach such children, referring to the special support teacher as the person most responsible and appropriate to do so. Moreover, some of the teachers could see the school's role and responsibility in providing educational opportunities to all in the classroom, but for various reasons, they stated they were unable to do so fully. The following relatively long interview extract is revealing:

> Teacher: … What I say is yes, as teachers we have a great responsibility. This of course doesn't mean that we don't do whatever possible. On the one hand, there are some issues that are beyond our strengths. For example, time restrictions to adapt the teaching process and curriculum, inadequate training to do so and the actual absence of communication with the special support teacher. On the other hand, schools can only do a little to change the attitudes of pupils. These, I believe, are mostly formed by the family at home.
>
> … I don't think that Maria [pupil identified as having special educational needs] can benefit a lot in academic terms. What I really anticipate is that she can acquire some basic learning skills such as reading, writing and arithmetic, and make some friends. I believe she can gain more in social terms rather than in academic terms. What I've been trying to achieve since the beginning of the school year is to engage her in many group activities. Moreover, I emphasise to pupils that they shouldn't make fun of any of their classmates and should be accepting to everyone. But it just seems not to be working out, as you noticed yourself. As far as teaching is concerned within the mainstream classroom, I have been using the peer-tutoring approach for sometime now. This is, firstly, due to the lack of teaching time and, secondly, I think it is a useful approach which is of benefit to Maria and other pupils with particular learning needs. That way we can avoid labelling of these pupils whilst a sense of community and helping-each-other ethos is being cultivated within the classroom. However, I think Maria is best cognitively supported in the special support class under the instruction of the special support teacher.

As shown above and throughout the study, the majority of teachers developed a 'feeling sorry' or charitable lens by which to view pupils identified as having special educational needs. Another teacher stated:

> … as good Christians, we should embrace and love all children, especially children with special needs. This is what I'm trying to persuade all children in my class; to love and respect Fotini and Stella [pupils identified as having special educational needs] the way they are and not of what they know.

It is clear that the teacher saw Fotini and Stella as persons to love and respect due to their identified special educational needs. Overall, most teachers across the five schools located learning and other problems within the child rather than acknowledging the social model or their responsibility to facilitate the learning of all pupils in the classroom. As a result, their teaching choices were based on the deficit model. In teaching terms, they usually claimed that it was impossible to educate all pupils within the classroom because of some pupils' special educational needs. Within the Cypriot context, in the case of a pupil who is not identified as having special educational needs but has, for example, persistent learning difficulties, it is the teacher who first initiates the identification process of that child. In terms of a deficit model though, this process provides an 'easy solution' or 'get away' to the teacher's perceived 'inability' to teach all pupils in the class and implicitly distributes their teaching responsibilities to the experts. The following

statements, presented within the schools, highlight the teachers' exclusionary assumptions derived from this model:

- 'I wish I could help these pupils but I can't'.
- 'It is the special support teacher's responsibility to educate these children. It is not possible for them to follow the pace of the lesson within the normal classroom. For example, George (pupil identified as having special educational needs) has given up'.

A very interesting case was a teacher in an urban school. As she admitted, she had ascribed to the deficit model before she undertook her Master's degree in Special and Inclusive Education. It was only after this experience that she changed her views towards a social model of understanding disability and learning difficulties. Indeed, subsequently her teaching was carefully planned to include all children and she thoroughly acknowledged the social and institutional construction of disability or special educational needs within the Cypriot framework. This teacher is a clear example of how in-service training and professional development can shift beliefs and in doing so, alter the teaching arrangements of teachers.

Florian and Kershner (2008) point out that the development of inclusive pedagogy involves day-to-day decisions in school, using the many resources which are available. From a sociocultural perspective, they argue that inclusive pedagogy is best seen as a strategic process that focuses on supporting the processes of children's learning, motivation and social interaction, rather than primarily on identifying special needs, differentiating work and providing additional resources and support. Avramidis and Norwich (2002) have stated that a key element in the successful implementation of inclusive education is the views of the personnel who have the major responsibility for implementing it, that is, teachers. Within the Cypriot context, research studies suggest that teachers lack both the necessary knowledge and attitudes in order to support or provide inclusive education (Angelides, Charalambous, and Vrasidas 2004). Angelides (2004) notes that some teachers who participated in his research exhibited discriminatory views and attitudes in respect to the education of children identified as having special educational needs. In a subsequent study, regarding the patterns of inclusive education through the practice of student teachers, he suggests that student teachers maintain positive attitudes towards children that tend to be marginalised, they encourage participation of all children in classroom activities and they attempt to overcome factors that act as barriers to inclusion (Angelides 2007). This inevitably has implications to teachers' training programmes and continuous professional development initiatives in Cyprus.

Pupils' perspectives

Inevitably, deficit-oriented teaching influences the way children view their classmates who have been identified as having special educational needs. Complementary to teaching, other factors were found in this study that were likely to drive pupils' views and behaviours, such as their home environment and the overall cultural and teachers' values and views towards disability and/or children who do not achieve well in academic terms. Along these lines, the withdrawal from the mainstream classroom to the special support class was a key reason for pupils' deficit-driven

views. This way of thinking was obvious in children's statements. Many stated that their classmates who attend the special support class were doing so because, 'there is something wrong inside their heads', 'they get help so to catch up with the rest of the class', and 'they are not that good pupils so they attend this class'.

Two immediate, but somehow contradictory, results of this kind of thinking were as follows: feeling sorry for their peers while also making fun of and teasing them. These findings reinforce further the exclusion and marginalisation of these pupils within the school. This clearly shows that the withdrawal of some pupils in the special support class generates negative attitudes and stereotyping behaviours. Even though, it is thought by parents and teachers that the special support class is the best available option for the education of pupils identified as having special educational needs, the findings of this study reveal actually that this is not true in the majority of the cases. In contrast, it actually reinforces exclusionary thinking and attitudes.

The attendance in the special support class actually reinforces further the exclusion of pupils identified as having special educational needs when in the mainstream class. For example, Fotini and Stella were sitting together in the classroom. When I asked the teacher why this was so, she responded that nobody wanted to sit with them: 'I tried many times in the past to convince children to sit with them but everybody reacts excessively' Antonia (classroom teacher) pointed out. She went on saying:

> … in the beginning of the school year I made sitting rotation compulsory on a weekly basis. Not even two weeks had gone by and a mother of a female pupil told me that she did not want her child to be sitting next to either Fotini or Stella, by no means.

This is also revealing of the wider cultural values towards pupils who are perceived as less able and so identified as having special educational needs. As Antonia pointed out during the interview, many parents also do not want their children to sit with either Fotini or Stella because they think this will have a detrimental effect on their children's learning. This view is also widespread among some of the classroom pupils. For example, Ilias (nine years old) in the interview said:

> '… in the case we work in small groups, I would prefer only 'good' pupils in my group because we can achieve better results that way'.

When I asked who these pupils could be, he answered:

> … I can say the ones I don't want in my group. I would not like Fotini, Stella, Andreas and Mary because they are not 'good' pupils. Erm, Andreas is not that 'bad', but he is not behaving well in the classroom so that's why.

Parents' perspectives

The views and beliefs of parents with respect to the deficit and charitable model have not directly been addressed by this study, but have been inferred by teachers' and children's responses as well as recorded on the reflexive diary through informal conversations. For example, one incident described by a teacher (Aphrodite) at one of the schools revealed the values of parents in this area. In total, three classes (two from Year 3 and one from Year 4) took part in the research from this school. In comparing the two classes of the third grade, a big discrepancy in terms of numbers

of pupils officially identified as having special educational needs was observed. In class 3 there were five pupils, while in class 2 just one. This was not coincidental. Aphrodite, the teacher of class 3, explained that this was due to parental pressure. Many of the parents in class 2 class believed that the education or coexistence of pupils identified as having special educational needs in their children's class would have a detrimental effect on their children's learning. According to Aphrodite, a typical and rather shocking response from one mother was: 'I don't want my child to be educated in the same class with the retarded'. However, there were other parents who believed in the inclusion of everyone in teaching and learning and saw benefits from this for their child's overall development. In the words of another mother: 'I would like my child to be educated in the same class with children with special needs because this is going to develop positive attitudes to my child towards disabled people'. This debate had been really intense at the beginning of the school year, and Aphrodite argued that this was why the two classes were so disproportional in terms of special educational needs concentration rates.

Two extremes are portrayed by the following statements by mothers: 'I don't want my child to be in the same class with the retarded' and 'I would like my child to be educated in such a classroom in order to develop positive attitudes towards the pupils with special needs'. The first mother believes that her child should not be co-educated with these 'highly problematic' children, 'retarded' in her actual words. She even justified her response by claiming that most of these children should not be in the mainstream school and, indeed, not in the mainstream classroom because their presence inhibits the learning of the 'normal' children who 'want to learn'. This view could be characterised as the 'negative' side of the deficit model. A kind of 'positive' response, still deriving from this model, is supported by the second mother. Her beliefs still stem from the charitable model, in a more sympathetic way. Rephrasing her words, she believed that children identified as having special educational needs are indeed different and need to be 'loved' or metaphorically 'used' to enhance positive attitudes in 'normal' children. Hence, in both cases, the concept of 'normality' is central.

These findings are reflected in other studies within the Cypriot framework. According to Symeonidou (2002) Cypriot society considers disabled people as individuals who need to be 'taken care of' and 'loved' by other members of society. Cypriots view charity work as a fundamental means of meeting the needs of their disabled fellow citizens. People repeatedly express their obligation to contribute financially to the well-being of disabled people, whereas the financial obligation of the state is not considered (Phtiaka 1999). This provides evidence to suggest that Cypriot society is still attached to the charity model of disability that has long been criticised (Symeonidou 2002). This model is also accompanied with prejudicial behaviours towards disabled people. It is expressed in many ways and in many different places, such as schools and the wider community.

The medical model that is driving both thinking and actions of the main actors of inclusion in Cyprus as recorded across the five schools, focuses on individuals who need fixing, either by therapy, medicine or special support staff. A focus on individual pupils thus implies that pupils must either be 'cured' or 'fit in' to mainstream settings (Peters 2007). These uncritical assumptions, stemming from the deficit model of disability, need to be questioned radically so as to allow inclusive education to employ a social model which takes into consideration the environment, resources, conditions, pedagogy and so forth.

Ceiling approach to inclusion

Inclusion is understood as consisting of different, separate, and distinguishable stages, namely locational, social, and academic inclusion. Within the five schools, primarily but not exclusively, inclusion was implemented on a solely locational level. According to teachers' and pupils' major tenor of responses in this research, inclusion is understood as being divided into different, separate and distinguishable stages. This is particularly true in terms of social and academic inclusion. Only a very small number of teachers and pupils within the research argued that pupils identified as having special educational needs can benefit academically from their inclusion or placement in a mainstream school. This approach to inclusion inevitably limits the scope of inclusion of pupils identified as having special educational needs. It also leads teachers to maintain lower learning expectations of such pupils.

The participants in the research agreed that pupils identified as having special educational needs could only benefit socially from their attendance in the mainstream classroom lessons. One teacher said:

> … Pupils with special needs can only benefit socially in the mainstream classroom. They cannot follow the pace of the lesson due to their learning difficulties.

Likewise, Christensen and Rizvi (1996) have observed that the broader issue of inclusion as a social goal for all members of society has also influenced the debate on the inclusion of children identified as having special educational needs.

In terms of developing academically, there was a wide view that it is only through the attendance at the special support class that this can be achieved, if at all.

> Teacher: … these children [children identified as having special educational needs] can only learn something in the special support class, under the guidance of the special support teacher. One-to-one teaching really can make a difference. This is impossible in the mainstream classroom.

It is apparent that in Cyprus there is considerable confusion as to what 'inclusion' means. To some extent, this lack of clarity might be partly attributed to the respective policy documents, such as the 1999 Education Act (MEC 1999). It appears that the government has adopted a pragmatic rather than a radical inclusion policy, taking account of the views of teachers and parents. Charalambides (1998) has argued that parents of disabled pupils in Cyprus have successfully lobbied the Cypriot Parliament during the discussion of the White Paper for the 1999 Education Act. They demanded the development of special classes within mainstream settings so as to provide individualised support to pupils from special support teachers. Indeed, these micro-politics of parents have introduced many amendments to the final document. Similarly, Symeonidou (2002) notes that parents in Cyprus form powerful pressure groups that influence decision-making in education. According to teachers across the five schools, most parents of pupils identified as having special educational needs believe that their children benefit more in a special support class or special unit as they receive individualised and tailored teaching. This view was shared by teachers too as they have argued that it is very unlikely for pupils identified as having special educational needs to benefit academically in the mainstream classroom due to their inabilities to keep up with the lesson's pace.

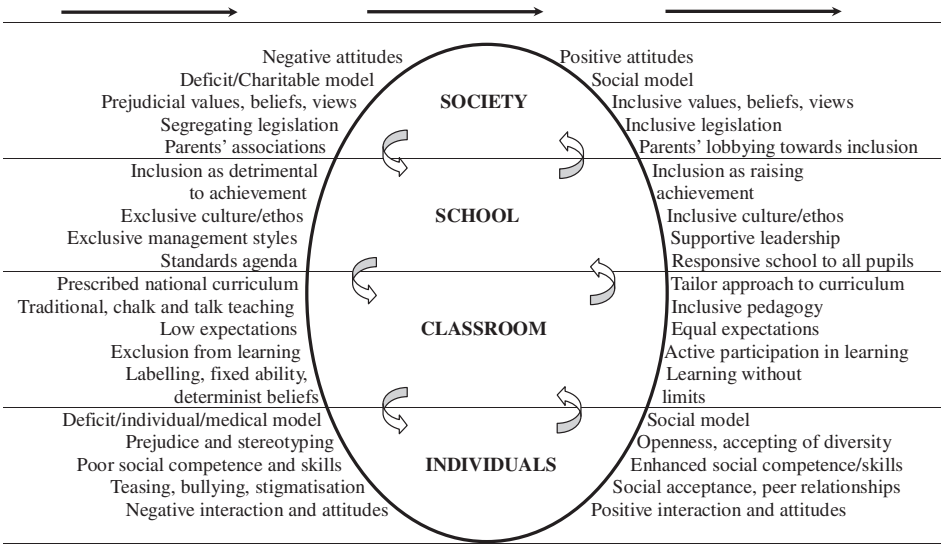

Figure 1. Framework for understanding and transforming inclusive education in Cyprus.

This key theme supports further the terminological ambiguity around the notion of inclusion that exists within the five schools and indeed throughout the Cypriot educational system. This confusion inevitably leads to practices that actually go against the philosophy of inclusive education. Inclusion is not understood as a process but instead it is 'chopped' into three separate hierarchical stages, to which only some pupils can reach and some others may not. This practice though reinforces exclusionary assumptions that help to perpetuate exclusion and marginalisation of pupils identified as having special educational needs. Moreover, a general consensus has been reached that inclusion can only bring social benefits to pupils identified as having special educational needs. The findings of this research suggest that although coexistence might be a necessary element for 'social inclusion', it is not enough. Pupils who maintain poor social interactions and contacts with peers have been found to under-perform in academic tasks and vice versa.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have endeavoured to develop a framework for understanding inclusion, backed by data collected from five mainstream primary schools. It has become apparent that inclusion should be seen as a holistic and never-ending process that enhances the overall development of all pupils. Inclusion cannot be fragmented in separable stages or levels because this largely leads to solely locational inclusion and marginalisation of many pupils identified as having special educational needs. The following figure depicts how I have come to understand inclusive education within the Cypriot context. Indeed, this in-depth understanding of inclusion across the five schools has led to a framework for transforming it (Figure 1).

As shown in Figure 1, the inclusion process across the five schools can be understood by examining the society, schools, classrooms and individuals. This

research has presented data to suggest a constant interaction among these four dimensions. However, it would have been impossible to examine all four dimensions in depth in this study. Schools and classrooms are placed in the middle of this process as they hold considerable power through how they are organised to transform the status quo. However, this does not imply any hierarchical relationship between them but rather shows that education as a system can and should transform the potentially negative educational experiences of many pupils. Inevitably, this research has taken only a snapshot of inclusive and special education in Cyprus at a certain period of time and place. The upper arrows on Figure 1 denote the direction (from left to right) of inclusive education across the schools I have researched. There is no beginning or end in this figure. This implies that inclusion is always a continuum and cannot be seen as a point of departure or arrival.

The three key themes presented and analysed in this paper are evident within society, the schools, individual classrooms and people. There needs to be a more comprehensive understanding of these key themes as they constitute important barriers to inclusion. The medical and sympathetic views of society in Cyprus should be challenged so they become more inclusive and less charitable. Likewise, schools should embrace themselves with more knowledge and openness when dealing with students with diverse or additional learning needs. Teachers should receive more training so their medical views towards pupils identified as having special educational needs are challenged and their professional skills is further developed. In particular, inclusive pedagogy should be at the heart of the school's pedagogy and replace the rather deterministic, didactic and teacher-centred approaches that are currently being implemented. Looking at Rouse's (2008) triangular model of 'knowing, doing and believing', probably constitutes a comprehensive framework to implement more inclusive pedagogical approaches within the Cyprus educational system. However, the area of inclusive pedagogy requires further research so that educators can gain a fuller and better understanding of what it is and how it is successfully implemented.

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